The Ceili House

The Buzz 1955 Winter

“Put out the light,” my mother shouted from the kitchen, as we climbed the stairs. Only eight steps to go until one of us got the buzz.

It was my turn. With some fear and excitement I reached to touch the black switch. My fingers slipped on to the wires. “Missed again,” my sister smirked after she had ‘dunted’ me at that moment I got the shock.

Our dad was the ‘fixer man’. He could fix anything. Mending bicycles and radios. Anything electric.

Above the shop was our bedroom. Though he made daily promises to screw the cap on the switch. It never happened.

Vowing she would never push me again, I dived into bed first, to sleep at the wall. It was cosier and warmer there. The kitchen stove was just below. The chimney line went up towards the sky along that wall.

Noreen pulled the old man’s coat over to her side. Falling asleep she muttered , “I’m winning”.

As the fiddle began, and the singing, I too dozed off. Happily looking forward to Saturday night when we could stay up late. Singing our very own songs. All practiced, when asked.

There was no pattern. No date set. No particular evening arranged for the gatherings. The ceilis to happen. They just did. In the winter though, Saturdays always brought the strays.

Sometimes ‘Tommy the Barber’ waltzed in through the shop, our bicycle shop, to the back kitchen with all the latest street gossip. He heard it all, first hand, in his shop as he cut the hair short and trimmed the beards. This was two doors away from ours.

My da would slip out, across the road, returning with a few bottles of stout from the pub.

Often Tommy went missing too, for a short time, returning with his fiddle. Sometimes with his wife. Others would then arrive as well. Why, or how, they knew was a mystery. These evenings of ‘craic’, music and dance just unfolded.

Years later a man sat in our newly renovated shop front , now a sitting room, reading his paper. When eventually asked why he was there, he stuttered, “oh, I thought I was in the Barbers shop!!!”.

The Bulls Track

It was a bright summer’s evening as the Royal Enfield motor cycle slowed to a stop at the crossroads. There was quite a gathering of teenage folk already as my dad sat the bike in on the

hedge. The laughter and craic was in full flow and spying Sarah among the group of ladies, his heart began to beat a little fast.

“Hello Sarah”, he muttered shyly as she stood chattering to the team. All dressed in white blouses, green skirts and ties. Muddy black gutties and knee socks. Each one held a camogie stick. She was the captain.

She laughed and smiled at him. Her face becoming flushed as she shook her long black hair and

fluttered the long dark eyelashes over her very blue eyes.

“You all won again”, he muttered as he moved closer to the crowd. Everyone else, including the boys, began to whistle and whisper at that scenario as my mother moved towards him.

“The Bulls Track” at the crossroad suited everyone to meet up in this countryside of Ballymacnab. This evening however a “meteorite shower” was supposed to arrive around dusk. And it did. Putting his arm around Sarah, they watched the wonders of that shower. As the other began to leave and lingering for a chat,

Arthur asked Sarah for a date to go to Keady to the cinema. He was older than my mum. Eighty years in all and an orphan.

As a twenty-one year old, her parents did not approve of their friendship. She was forbidden to take him home. They did however marry a few years later. My grandfather did not attend their wedding. Moving to Keady, after renting an old pub premises, they set up a bicycle shop.

Going home from a Keady fair, Grandad popped into their shop. Just out of the blue. Sarah was shocked when he handed her an envelope and walked away

muttering the word ‘sorry’. One hundred pounds was a tidy sum those days as my mother placed it in her apron pocket. Reminiscing about ‘The Bulls Track’, the camogie team, meteorite showers, the soft tears flowed. She knew she was forgiven.

End Of The War

Noreen my sister was born the day World War Two ended followed by Pat in 1946. There was barely a year between them. I became the baby for the next few years followed by Kathleen and James in one or two year steps. Mother was very holy.

Taking us to mass on Sundays was never a chore. Always without our dad, she ingrained a sense of religion in our minds.

Going to the school run by the poor Clare nuns was easy too. It was just beside the chapel and a street away from our bicycle shop and home. Money never seemed to be a problem. Everyone wanted a bike. Royal Enfield Cycles lined the shop counter and walls.

All wrapped up in long thin slices of brown paper, stacks of spare tubes, tyres, repair kits and cycle lamps lined the old pub shelves.

The front window, below the old and fading Guinness sign, held two of the most gleaming and shining bikes. On display. Tempting the customers to enter.

The canon of our parish was a frequent visitor. Although he was in his middle years, his stern and slow talking manner gave us a sense of fear. Hearing him giving the sermon in the chapel only enhanced that feeling.

Coming mainly to chat to my father and asking him to fix some electrical fault in the chapel or parochial house. He came one

particular evening. One I will never forget.

Mother heard his persisting knock on our kitchen door at the back of the shop. Realising who it probably was, she gingerly opened the door. I was close behind.

“First of all”, he said sternly, “no one is manning the shop”. “No one is answering my call”, and “Arthur did not turn up to fix the lights”. At this point we began to laugh quietly. Holding my hand over my mouth, I could see what was happening.

Our bedroom was just above. My wee brother Jim had just gone to bed. There was a liquid drip landing on the rim of the canon's felt hat. "You did not hear me rapping the door", he resumed and "now you find this funny". Realising the water leaking from the ceiling was indeed pee.

The pee pot had got knocked over by little James was the only explanation of this liquid dripping on the canon's hat.

As he turned crossly away, saying, "tell Arthur we need him now". "Do not forget". He stumbled passed the bikes and left.

Laughing until the tears ran down our faces, mother shrugged her heaving shoulders saying, “what about a nice wee bit of toast and Jam!!!”.